

THE NEGLECT OF THE ANCIENT CLASSICS AT THE EARLY MEDIEVAL UNIVERSITIES.

LOUIS J. PAETOW.

Not a single one of the ancient classics is prescribed in the statutes of the various universities of Europe of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.¹ The history of universities, especially the internal history, can not be read solely from the statutes, and hence it would be rash to conclude from such evidence that during this time no university student or master ever opened Virgil or Horace. Nevertheless, the silence of the statutes forcibly emphasizes the well established truth that the ancient authors were seriously neglected at the early medieval universities.

This striking phenomenon has attracted much attention ever since the time of the first Italian humanists. In accounting for it many serious writers have entirely misinterpreted medieval culture and education. Until recently it was customary to dismiss the subject by dwelling upon the utter barrenness of classical, as well as of all other lay learning in the Middle Ages, and thus intimate that nothing better could have been expected from the work at the universities. To-day no competent scholar would pronounce such a verdict. The term "Twelfth Century Renaissance" is becoming a familiar phrase, and is finding its way into hand-books and text-books. An important phase of this earlier Renaissance was a revival of the ancient classics.

¹ In this paper, ancient classics will be used as synonymous with Latin classics, for throughout the period under discussion. Greek was almost wholly unknown in the schools.

Already in the eleventh century there were distinct indications of a renewed interest in the ancient authors. The real home of the revival was northern France, and our surest and most complete information in regard to it comes in shortly after the first crusade. "I see villages and towns fairly burn with eagerness in the study of grammar," wrote Guibert of Nogent, in the preface to his history of the crusade. Elsewhere he adds that it had been far otherwise in the days of his boyhood. The center for the study of the classics was Chartres. Here grammar was studied in the broad sense in accordance with the definition of Rabanus Maurus, who called it "The art of explaining poets and historians, the art of correct speaking and writing." Hither came the Englishman, John of Salisbury. He has left us glowing accounts of the sympathetic method in which the classic authors were there taught. An ardent admirer of Cicero, he exclaims: "The world never possessed a Latinist greater than Cicero." Involuntarily we associate John of Salisbury with Petrarch.

Towards the close of the twelfth century the schools of Chartres declined rapidly. Orleans now became the center of classical learning. Meanwhile the great universities were taking shape. The intellectual vigor of the twelfth century was finding its expression in these splendid new institutions of learning. We should expect that the study of the Latin authors would have found at them a wider scope. But the renewed interest in the classics was only one of the factors of the revival, and by no means the most pronounced. All the greatest intellects of the age were bending their best efforts towards scholastic philosophy and theology, or the practical studies of medicine and law. Probably a university could never have arisen on a purely humanistic basis. It required an Abelard and an Irnerius to lay the foundations of universities.

Thus from the very start, the classics were overshadowed at these new institutions by more popular studies. For a long time, however, they still held their own. At the beginning of the thirteenth century various writers associated Orleans with the great universities of the day. As Salerno was known for medicine, Bologna for law, Paris for arts, so, they said, Orleans

was famous for its study of the ancient authors.¹ Evidently those men believed that the classics would keep their rank among the prominent intellectual pursuits of that day. The study of the authors was by no means confined to Orleans. Even at Paris they still flourished. The Welshman, Gerald de Barri tells us that he studied them there. Sermons were still being preached before the students at Paris warning them against the dangers of the heathen literature of Rome. An anonymous manuscript at Gonville and Gaius College, Cambridge, contains an interesting list of books prescribed for every grade and subject of instruction.¹ Various works of a considerable number of classical authors are mentioned: Statius, Virgil, Juvenal, Horace, Ovid, Sallust, Cicero, Martial, Petronius, Symmachus, Suetonius, Livy and Seneca. Then follow books recommended for the seven liberal arts, and the higher branches of learning, medicine, law and theology. The list was drawn up towards the close of the twelfth century, probably in England.² Very likely it reflects the work done at this time at Oxford and Paris. At all events, it shows that about 1200 the study of the classics was still associated with the branches ordinarily taught at medieval universities.

Within the first half of the thirteenth century, however, interest in the classics waned rapidly. In 1234 John Garland, a professor of grammar at Paris, still warmly espoused the cause of Orleans, but in the same breath he laments that "the Latin language is decaying, the green fields of the authors are withering, and the jealous blast of Boreas has blighted the flowery meadows."¹ His is the last plea for the classics which comes from the walls of the great university of Paris. About 1250 the troubadour Henri d'Andely wrote his famous allegorical poem entitled the "*Battle of the Seven Arts*." Grammar, the champion of Orleans, supported by the classic authors, goes out to battle against Logic of Paris, who is supported by all the

¹ Matthew of Vendôme, Geoffrey de Vinsauf, and Helinand.

¹ Ms. 385 pp. 7-61.

² I owe this conclusion as to the date and provenance of the Ms to Professor C. H. Haskins of Harvard.

¹ *Ars lectoria ecclesiae*. Ms. Bruges 546 fol. 76 v°.

studies taught at that university. After a spirited engagement, Orleans is defeated, and the Muse of Poetry goes into hiding. The author of the poem concludes with the optimistic reflection that the next generation would surely see the futility of logic, and return to the study of belles lettres. His hopes were not to be realized. At the beginning of the fourteenth century Orleans had become the seat of a famous university of law. When Petrarch was a boy, the few students of arts who still studied at Orleans apparently had forgotten the ancient poets, and were lost in the "labyrinth of Aristotle."

Thus, as the universities increased in importance, the classics declined, and therefore did not find a place in the curriculum of the new institutions. Here and there, learned men still read them, and even some students at universities may not have given them up entirely. Thus we have a note-book containing comments on the Georgics of Virgil, and a fragment of Seneca, written by a student at Toulouse in the thirteenth century.¹ After all has been said, however, the general disregard of the classics at the early universities marks the last half of the thirteenth century and the beginning of the fourteenth as one of the very dreariest periods for classical learning. Petrarch, "the morning-star of the Renaissance,"² stands out so clearly because it was darkest just before the dawn.

We are now ready to consider more specifically the causes for this neglect. All too often the whole blame for it has been laid at the door of scholasticism, that magic term which has been used to explain such a multitude of sins. The explanation is not quite so simple. Many causes combined to bring about the decline. I shall consider them under the following heads: (1) Strict clerical feeling against profane and, in particular, indecent profane literature; (2) Popularity in the schools of good medieval Latin literature; (3) Renewed interest in science; (4) Rise of the lucrative studies of medicine and law (including *ars dictaminis*); (5) Increasing popularity of logic which led to scholastic philosophy and theology.

¹ *Catalogue Général des Mss.* Tome VII Paris, 1885, p. 459. No. 811 (I 324). The University of Toulouse was founded 1229.

² Sandys—*A History of Classical Scholarship* (1906) p. 678.

(1) In the twelfth and thirteenth, as well as in all previous centuries of the Middle Ages, there cropped out again and again a strong clerical feeling against the classics, decrying them as useless and dangerous heathen products. Alexander of Ville-dieu, (c. 1200) once a professor at the University of Paris, warned the masters of Orleans that unless they forsook the classics, the gates of Paradise would forever remain closed to them. Jacques de Vitry (d. 1240) in a sermon before the students of Paris, said: "In spite of the utility of the art of eloquence which we derive from the poets, properly called authors, (*auctores*) it is better to choose for our instruction those works which contain moral teaching. . . . Do not books of this kind suffice without turning to the historians and the poets for excitations which lead to debauch and vanity?" Sermons often fall on deaf ears, but, as we shall see, the minds of those Parisian students had already been molded by various other influences so that it was easy for them to do for once as their preacher bade them. Time and time again protests also arose against the positively indecent literature of Rome. Some of the best disciples of the famous schools of Chartres, notably Peter of Blois (d. 1204), seriously injured the cause of the classics by writing light and scurrilous verses which the moralists of the age pointed to as the results of familiarity with the Roman poets.

(2) Especially in the twelfth century a good deal of excellent Latin literature was written which deservedly became popular. Just as the pagan poets were often crowded out of the schools by the early Christian poets such as Prudentius and Sedulius, so now the works of modern authors frequently displaced the classics or at least were read side by side with them. The most renowned of these was the *Alexandreis* of Gautier de Lille (1176-1179), a Latin epic poem recounting the deeds of Alexander the Great. Henri de Gard (d. 1295) wrote that in his day the *Alexandreis* was read to such an extent, that on this account the ancient poets were neglected. A good deal of excellent lit-

¹ *Sermo coram scholaribus*. Ms. Bibl. Nat. Lat. 17509 fos. 31, 32. Translated in Lecoy de la Marche, *La Chaire Française au Moyen Age*, pp. 474-475.

erature in the vernacular was also produced at this time, especially in France, but since none of it was ever admitted into the schools, where Latin alone prevailed, its rivalry with the Latin classics is hard to trace.

(3) The thirteenth century was in many ways an era of science. Contact with the East in general and the Mohammedans in particular, brought about by the Crusades, had quickened scientific interest in the West. Towards the end of the twelfth century the Englishman Daniel de Morlai went to Spain to learn science from the famous Arab teachers at Toledo. About this time the natural philosophy of Aristotle was introduced into Western Europe and became an important stimulus to scientific study and investigation. The branches of the *quadrivium* seem to have been fairly popular at Paris for Jacques de Vitry preached against them as vain learning in the same sermon in which he denounced the classics. In the "*Battle of the Seven Liberal Arts*" Astronomy decided the day by flinging her lightning among the tents of the authors of Orleans. The scientific trend of the age may be seen in the works of Albert the Great, but above all in those of Roger Bacon, in many ways the most remarkable man of the thirteenth century. But there must have been many minor lights in science like that Peter of Maricourt whom Roger Bacon met at Paris and whom he described as a true experimental scientist. This scientific movement did not bear much fruit in the work of medieval universities, but while it was in its vigor, it helped to detract interest from classic literature.

(4) The practical studies of medicine and law rose to such importance that they became the foundation stones of many large universities. Indeed, civil or canon law, or both, were taught at all the medieval universities whereas not even one-half of them had a faculty of theology. These branches exercised great attraction by the prospect of pecuniary gain which they held out to students. Hence in their eagerness to study law or medicine students not only neglected the ancient authors, but often failed to acquire the necessary elements of grammar. "*The Battle of the Seven Liberal Arts*" speaks of the physi-

cians and the churgeons of Paris as enemies of the good old authors. The competition of law with the classics is especially apparent, even at Paris. Gerald de Barri recalled how he once heard a certain professor at Paris proclaim before a multitude of students that the evil days had come which the sibyl had foretold in her prophecy, "The days will come, woe to them, when law will obliterate the study of letters." If such was the effect of law on literary studies at Paris what must it have been at Bologna! The absence of the classics at that great Italian university during the thirteenth century must in the first instance be attributed to the overwhelming importance of law. We have already seen how Orleans, renowned for classics in the first half of the thirteenth century, in the fourteenth was known only for law.

Closely related to law, although not a part of it, was another competitor of the ancient classics, namely the *ars dictaminis* or the art of writing letters and formal documents. This too was a lucrative study since it prepared its votaries for positions in the chanceries of church and state. At Bologna it gradually usurped almost the whole field of the arts. In France also it became very popular. Students at Orleans deserted classical poetry and even theology to devote themselves to it. Ponce de Provence, a famous itinerant professor of the art came to Orleans about 1250 promising his students that he would pass by the fables of the authors and lead them directly to that pearl of knowledge, the *ars dictaminis*.

(5) After all, however, the most important cause of the decline of the classics and of purely literary pursuits generally was the rise of dialectics to undisputed eminence among the arts. This is true especially because the reign of Aristotle became most absolute in northern France where the humanistic tendencies had been strongest.

At first there was no active antagonism between dialectics and the authors. Abelard himself had a due regard for the achievements of classical times and probably first awakened in his famous pupil, John of Salisbury, a sense of the importance of ancient literature. But the interest in speculative thinking

became too absorbing to allow the study of the authors to remain important. By gradual stages it simply monopolized the field of higher learning in the north of Europe and the literary and classical tendencies of Chartres and Orleans died a death of sheer starvation.

The change, however, did not take place without strong protests from many sides. The works of John of Salisbury are full of sane and vigorous denunciations of the foolish warfare of mere words without a previous foundation in real learning. He lamented that students praised only Aristotle and despised Cicero.¹ Nevertheless he was still hopeful and firmly believed that he could convince his contemporaries of the value of literary studies. Many more examples illustrating the same view might be drawn from Peter of Blois, Jean de Hauteville, Alexander Neckam and Gerald de Barri. As the thirteenth century advanced, however, the protests ceased and the dominance of Aristotle was absolute and unassailed.

These are the definable causes which led to neglect of the classics at the medieval universities. There may have been other causes, less tangible but of considerable weight. It should be remembered that the twelfth and thirteenth centuries comprised an era of great material development. In many ways a "backwoods" Europe was being transformed into a Europe with large well-built cities and highways for travel and commerce. It is always well worth while to reflect upon the bearing general conditions of life may have upon such a particular subject as we have in hand.

As we approach the period of Petrarch and Laurentius Valla our curiosity is naturally aroused to see what part the universities took in the revival of learning. In the first quarter of the fourteenth century several doctors were installed at the university of Bologna to lecture on Virgil, Cicero, Statius, Lucan and Ovid. This was a fair promise but it had no fulfillment. Later in the same century and in the next the university took practically no part in the humanistic movement which was stirring all about it. A more pronounced classical revival occur-

¹ *Entheticus*, 112.

red at Paris in the second half of the fourteenth century but that too was sporadic and had no permanent results. In England, Oxford became the center of a group of humanists who had received their inspiration from Italy. But on the whole the courses of study at the universities were scarcely at all modified prior to 1500. Dating from the very end of the fifteenth century we have a program of studies offered by a master of arts at Montpellier, which is entirely humanistic in character. Aristotle is set aside entirely, logic and philosophy are slighted whereas the main stress is laid upon oratory (*ars oratoria*) which comprises the study of a considerable number of classical authors.¹ This however, is an almost isolated exception which proves the rule that the medieval universities had very little to do with the humanistic movement of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

¹ Fournier—Statutes, No. 1206, p. 278. (1496)